

The Layoff Checklist

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“It won’t happen to me,” we tell ourselves, wiping the fear sweat off our brows. And yet, for too many of us, a layoff is an inevitable part of working in this tough economy. Though no longer a comment on your work performance, expertise, or even value, when you lose your job it can be emotionally and financially devastating. After you hear the words, your brain can shut down. In fact, for some of us (myself included), panic can set in as the layoff rumors circulate.

To help you out, I created some lists I could have used when the axe fell on me 30 years into an otherwise successful, peaceful career.

1 – What to do BEFORE they begin to cut

- Build your LinkedIn network. Every name is a potential contact for the next job. LinkedIn gives you a way to mine your contact’s contacts as well, which will expand most networks into the millions of names.

810 Connections link you to
9,913,126+ professionals

- Write recommendations for others on LinkedIn and elsewhere. Don’t just do the checkbox for skills – write something sincere and specific. Later, people are more likely to reciprocate when you need help.

- Backup personal files that reside on your work PC. Consider removing them after you do this. For those who are locked down and cannot use any external media, email small groups of these files.
- Backup your browser favorites list.
- Backup your email list. Make sure you can contact your colleagues and friends.
- Have a non-cute personal email account. Use your initials or name, i.e., denisekalm@gmail.com
- Create a list of people who would be willing to be a reference for you.
- Create and save off a “kudos” file – notes and emails on your successes. Also, print off or backup all performance reviews and status reports. These will help improve your resume by reminding you of your significant accomplishments.
- Also document your training, awards and other details of notable accomplishments.
- Where applicable, copy and save off work product that you can use to demonstrate expertise. Make sure that none is proprietary. If you have created work for the web, this is particularly important as companies have a habit of deleting items created by former employees. If it was public, you can show it off.
- Clear out treasured personal items from your desk. You may not have time later and under the gaze of a security guard, may miss something you really care about.
- Despite panic (and while everyone around you is losing their minds), hunker down and focus on completing high priority work items, then advertise widely what you have done. Many people whose names initially appeared on layoff lists

were saved by another manager when their value was recognized. You may not know you were saved, but if you do not get laid off, but find yourself with a new job in the same company, this is the likely explanation. It's not over until it's over.

2 – What to do if it's you?

Don't immediately focus on job hunting. You won't be at your best and your resume needs updating. You also need to figure out what you can best sell of your accomplishments and interests.

- Know your rights. You do not have to go through all of the documents right after learning that you have been cut, nor do you have to sign something that day. If you want to have more time to read the material, ask questions and perhaps chat with an attorney, insist on it. Despite what they say, you have the right to fully understand what you are signing. You will be giving up certain rights and agreeing to certain things to obtain your severance. For remote workers, you have a big advantage. Worst case, you can simply tell the person to call you back tomorrow and hang up. (Yes, I did that.)
- See if you can negotiate the severance benefits, such as the length of time that health coverage will be provided during the severance period.
- Check that the severance payment includes the right amount for the number of vacation days you are owed.
- Insist on a list of the titles and ages to ensure age discrimination isn't the issue. Large companies know to do this, but you may have to ask. The HR departments now have to do this. Most companies know better, BUT... It

does happen, and not every HR department has done a good job. If you can't get the list, use your LinkedIn network and other resources to try to get a good idea of the demographics hit.

- Ask about the ability to apply for internal jobs during the first weeks after your layoff. Many companies will provide you with an email list of these and you may actually have an edge in your application. You are treated more as an insider. Take advantage of this opportunity.
- No matter how you feel, insist on offering to do turnover with your direct manager. He/she is probably not the one who laid you off, nor did they likely have all that much say. Leave the way you started. It will pay off later in references and referrals. And besides, it's just good business.
- If you have work items at home (PC, phone, proprietary material), make sure you return all of it. Even when they give you an incomplete list, someone knows. However, it is up to your former employer to make it easy on you. They can and should send a postage-paid box to help you return this material. Don't drive in and don't pay for shipping.
- If you have an AMEX card and have paid to get the reward points, cash them in quickly (or transfer them to your personal AMEX account). You'll only have a short window to do this after the card is cancelled. No company will pay to get the rewards – this is something you had to do yourself. Check your monthly statement and you can see if you have points.
- Apply for unemployment immediately. It takes at least two weeks to process, plus they do take your severance into account so you won't see money right

away. But if you don't get it done quickly, it can be much longer before the money you deserve begins to be paid out. Take care with the paperwork.

The single missed item or mistake can delay you for weeks.

- If you used your own cell phone number for work, but they are paying the bill now, find out how to switch it to your own plan. Otherwise, you risk losing the number everyone knows. Next time, make the company get you a new plan and new number. Keep your personal cell phone just for yourself and do not use it for company business.
- If you are auto-funding investments from your paycheck, call your broker and get this stopped now. You can always restart it at a later date, but with nothing coming in, the drain on your bank accounts will be considerable. This is spending you can immediately eliminate.
- Cash in any vested stock options if the market shows it makes sense and you have the flexibility to wait. Be sure you know the rules of your vesting – you may only have 90 days to exercise them.
- Consider moving your 401K from your employer into your personal IRA account. It's easy to forget to do this and having many different accounts in many places makes it harder to manage your portfolio. If you are already paying for financial management, this makes even more sense. You will get the hands-on care you never had from the company management team. If you do keep it with your old company, keep on top of it as you would if you still worked there. Do not have them cut a check made out to you. Even if

you put it directly into your IRA account, the IRS thinks you took a withdrawal and who needs that fight?

- Before drawing on your investments, particularly your retirement accounts, to pay for day-to-day spending, talk with your investment advisor about the best sources for this income.
- Cut back spending wherever possible, even if you have a good lead on a job. This includes dining out, Starbucks, new tech purchases and impulse buys. It's a good discipline at any time and you will most likely find that there are ways to cut without too much pain. However, do invest in your job search. The longer you can hold out, the more likely you are to get not only a job you can love, but one where you will be more valued.
- Don't burn bridges. Anger is a very normal reaction, but IT is a really small community. Still, you need to take care of yourself, so vent with friends and family.
- File all expense reports as soon as possible.
- Carefully check final payments to be sure they are correct.
- Update your LinkedIn profile making sure to use key words recruiters are looking for.
- Study networking tips. There have been previous Measure IT articles on the subject.
- Check into your insurance options immediately. If you can get on a spouse's policy and it makes sense (better or cheaper than COBRA), opt for that. Or sign up for COBRA health insurance before the deadline – you often have a

few weeks or a month of regular health care coverage after you are laid off, but you do not want a gap. If you do not do this in a timely manner, you will have to go to the open market to get insurance and may be denied due to pre-existing conditions. It is also likely to be more expensive. Note: you cannot change plans with COBRA, so evaluate who should be covered. The cost may be an issue.

- Eat right, exercise and get plenty of sleep. This is a seriously stressful event and getting sick is not in your best interest now.

The most important thing for psychological health is that no matter what anyone says, for most, this is a time of grief and like any grieving process, it simply takes time. You may find that you get extremely angry months after the event and this is normal.

Celebrate every win you have and despite putting energy into job hunting, take some time for yourself. Many of us have never been involuntarily unemployed before.

Structure your days, but leave time for fun. As your mood lifts, you will find you are ready to show up strong for interviews and for your next job.